

Theatre Reviews

***Hamlet*. Dir. Simon Godwin. Royal Shakespeare Company. Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK.**

Reviewed by ***Danielle Nicole Byington****

Denmark relocated to Africa, a vibrantly-colored production design conveying bleak content, “To be [conventional] or not to be?”—Simon Godwin’s *Hamlet*, performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon, premiering in spring of 2016, wedded theatrical tradition with cross-cultural elements, engendering an innovative, artistic space for the production. A play famously concerned with mortality, Godwin’s production does not rely on the multicultural motif to simply make his version unique, but uses its nature as a method for more deeply communicating the difficult theme of death. Rhythmic, ritualistic, and representational, this *Hamlet* deserves to take its place alongside other innovative versions of Shakespeare’s most performed tragedy.

A brief commencement ceremony, in which Hamlet receives his diploma from Wittenberg with his fellow students, opens the performance, shot with a striking photography-strobe light effect; suddenly, however, a startling tribal drum’s thud stills the celebratory location before reconnecting the play—after a quick blackout—to its modern African setting, as the guards meet for their shift change, ala Marcellus and Barnardo. The Ghost of King Hamlet, portrayed by Ewart James Walter, effectively embodies his role as the “perturbed spirit,” communicating his message to the Prince with an eerie authority. Highlighting the importance of the spiritual realm in this *Hamlet*, a trapdoor was used to create an illusion of boundary between the space of the stage’s world and the intangible site of the mythical underworld. As the Ghost departs into this trapdoor after instructing Hamlet to take revenge, the thunderous rhythm of African percussions halts, forcing the audience back to the reality of Hamlet’s urgent mission.

At this moment in the play, Paapa Essiedu, the real star of this production, begins to dominate the stage. Frequently described in his portrayal

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of Hamlet as remarkably mature at only twenty-five years old, Essiedu's skill of delivering the Bard's verse is sagacious. His performance of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy reveals a genuine reflection on mortality, the internal, ponderous struggle with which Hamlet's character is often associated. When Ophelia enters, played by Natalie Simpson, the dispute between the assumed former lovers appears particularly physical under Godwin's direction, Hamlet throwing Ophelia on to a mattress in the nunnery scene's set. Additional details in the production's design—by Paul Anderson—further reveal the young Prince's frustration. Hamlet's anger and rebellion are demonstrated with boisterous, chaotic graffiti, a meshing of grungy high school sketches composed from a psychedelic-bright palette. This aggression is extended into his wardrobe, a white jacket embellished with similar graphic designs. With an image composed primarily of a skull and crown on his back, it is as if Hamlet's vandalized fashion echoes the oncoming struggle for his "coat" of arms, or, even more directly, when Essiedu strolls to a portrait of Claudius, calmly defacing the new King's picture with a steady waving of his can of spray paint.

When the players enter the stage to entertain the royal family with *The Murder of Gonzago*, the same mattress on which Hamlet had thrown Ophelia is stacked with a board and fluorescent-stained draping, quickly adapted into a makeshift stage for their performance. This directional choice ironically hearkens back to the Ghost's request to "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest" (1:5:82-83), as the players carry out their performance, the imitation of King Hamlet's death and his widow's hasty marriage. The production design separates their identities as performers performing for other performers with even more blaring colors, neons and mismatched patterns comprising their costumes. It is in scenes such as this that Tanya Moodie and Clarence Smith, Gertrude and Claudius, respectively, demonstrate a natural chemistry as the newly-wedded Queen and King. When Smith's Claudius reacts to the content of *Gonzago*, his demeanor suggests a passive but stern politician, rather than a reckless tyrant, a tone that represents his performance throughout the production.

Once Polonius is murdered by Hamlet, Essiedu becomes more erratic, and Godwin puts his original touch on the action succeeding Hamlet's banishment from the country. A ship's fog horn bellows at the dock awaiting Hamlet's boarding for England, followed shortly after by Laertes rappelling from a helicopter to his meeting with Claudius—both somewhat splashy facets in the performance's stylized modernism. Ophelia's mad scene, also in Act 4, attempts to recreate the shattered maiden with which audiences have come to expect from the text; however, even though Simpson's singing haunts the theatrical space, the hysteria she shifts into seemed forced considering her previously too-gentle essence prior to this point. The gravedigger scene again utilizes Walter, now stripped of his restless façade as the Ghost, appearing

instead as the gravedigger who light-heartedly sings a Calypso song into a femur bone as if it were a microphone. As Hamlet sneaks into this setting—his identifying-graffiti garbs swapped for lurking beanie and dark sweater—Essiedu's Yorick speech is uncanny, as if he expects Yorick to also recall his remembrances as he speaks to the hollow skull. Ophelia's funeral procession then enters, her body not in a coffin but tightly wrapped in gauze and hauled on the back of a pallbearer. Laertes and Hamlet's grave squabble culminates in the arrangement of their formal duel back at the palace, this production replacing swords with African stick fighting in the play's final scene.

Experiencing the play through Godwin's aesthetic, on a stage's space within the heart of Shakespeare's birthplace, offers a collision of cultures and continents for observers to sort out. What audiences of any version of *Hamlet* should expect is the striving of the company and creatives to provide a moment that enters the audience's mind and collaborates with what they think they know about the play, totally surprising them with something not only unexpected, but an artistic experience which they did not know they were seeking. Godwin has created not only a successful production, but one that, by utilizing the artistic direction of alternate time and place, deserves recognition as an exhilarating and unprecedented take on the traditional plight of the Prince of Denmark.

***Cymbeline*. Dir. Alexandros Cohen. “Hyperion” Theatre Company. Exarchia Theatre, Athens, Greece.**

Reviewed by *Xenia Georgopoulou**

Cymbeline in the sixties

Alexandros Cohen’s *Cymbeline*, first presented at the Exarchia Theatre in October 2016, was one of the very few Greek productions of the play. This was not the first time that the director dealt with a Shakespearean play that is rarely performed, even in its country of origin. He did it earlier in 2014, when he directed *Timon of Athens*. However, this does not mean that he is ignorant of risk. Acknowledging not only the problematic nature of *Cymbeline*, due to its length as well as its parallel plots,¹ but also the difficulty of staging the play on the relatively small stage of the Exarchia Theatre, Cohen decided to proceed to an adaptation.²

In his version the director cut about half of the play and eliminated a series of secondary characters. Of Shakespeare’s characters he kept Cymbeline and the Queen, Innogen³ and Cloten, Posthumus and Iachimo, the Roman general Caius Lucius, and the Doctor. Innogen’s confidante (called Helen in the original), who also replaced Pisanio in Cohen’s adaptation, was now called Cornelia (taking the doctor’s original name [Cornelius]).

Another crucial alteration Cohen made to the play was the removal of the subplot that refers to the kidnapping of Cymbeline’s sons. This left a couple of loose ends in the main plot. However, Cohen resolved this problem rather harmlessly; Innogen’s apparent death after drinking the Queen’s potion was not witnessed by anyone, and Cloten’s death supposedly happened during the battle.

Even with the removal of this part of the plot, the play remained complicated. To make things clearer, Cohen adopted some of the suggestions made by George Bernard Shaw for the production of the play starring Helen Terry as Imogen in 1896; he also used his characters as narrators, who occasionally explained to the audience what happened in the play. Such moments were the monologues of the Queen, Cornelia and Posthumus in the beginning of the play (who informed the audience about the characters and their

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¹ Cohen argues that this is the reason why *Cymbeline* is rarely staged (see the director’s note in the programme of the production [Γουίλλιαμ Σαίξπηρ, *Κυμβελίνος*, Εταιρεία Θεάτρου Υπερίων, Θέατρο Εξαρχείων, Αθήνα, 2016, p. 6]).

² For a detailed account of the changes see Cohen’s note in the programme (p. 84).

³ Cohen opted for ‘Innogen’, as opposed to ‘Imogen’ (in the *First Folio*).

stories), the Queen's report of the war between Britons and Romans, but also the dialogue between the dead Queen and the King, where she explained to him how she used him.

Cohen's *Cymbeline* was set in the 1960s, for two main reasons: firstly, the main scenery was a bourgeois living-room that could fit in the small stage of the theatre; and secondly, this time distance (though shorter than that between Roman Britain and Renaissance England) underlined the tale element that characterizes *Cymbeline* as a romance. Thus, the sixties played the role of "once upon a time" for both the younger generations, who were born later, and those who have lived in the sixties and feel nostalgic about the past.⁴

Within this atmosphere of the sixties there was also a contemporary Shakespearean reference: in the beginning of the production Innogen and Posthumus watch on the television a 1968 movie, namely Franco Zeffirelli's adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. The reference to the most famous Shakespearean couple is not random, since there are quite a few resemblances with the young couple of *Cymbeline*. In both plays the love affair between the young lovers, who get married in secret, is hindered by their parents, the young woman's father intends to marry her to somebody else, and the young hero is exiled. The resemblances between the two plays are underlined by the director: the scene he chooses to show from Zeffirelli's movie is the one where Friar Laurence takes Romeo away from Juliet, and right afterwards Cohen's Cloten attempts to separate Posthumus from Innogen. Moreover, in the character of Innogen's confidante Cornelia we may see Juliet's Nurse, especially in a scene where she takes some time to share the news with Innogen, which reminds us of *Romeo and Juliet* 2.5.⁵

Cymbeline is a play that deals a lot with shifting or hidden identities; Innogen dresses as a boy, Cloten wears Posthumus's clothes, Posthumus changes clothes shifting from the Roman to the British camp and back again. Cohen chose to underline these changes by putting them together on the stage at the same time. Using the furniture of the set he created, one may say, three individual stages. Posthumus changed clothes on a chair, Innogen on a couch, and Cloten on the table where the negotiations took place in other scenes. While this was happening, Cornelia, who had orchestrated their movements, as servants often do from the very beginning of dramaturgy, unreeled around them a tape like those used for works in progress, as if to delimit her own space of action, between the characters of the play. This was probably in line with the director's

⁴ Cohen also argues that in *Cymbeline* he located elements found in American films of the 1960s: love, agony, treason, intrigue, adventure (see "Αλέξανδρος Κοέν: 'Στο θέατρο ούτε τις δικλίδες ασφαλείας τηρώ, ούτε τον ασφαλή δρόμο ακολουθώ'", Interview to Maro Kastratou, *Θεατρικά Προγράμματα*, 9-12-2016, accessed 29-6-2017, <<http://www.theatrikaprogrammata.gr/αλέξανδρος-κοέν-στο-θέατρο-ούτε-τις-δ/>>).)

⁵ On the resemblance between the two plays see the director's note in the programme (p. 6).

choice to present the scenes outside the safety of the young characters' home as a supernatural, mysterious experience in a world that seems distorted, as opposed to the realistic depiction of the scenes within Cymbeline's kingdom.⁶

Cohen's whole *mise-en-scène* was firm, since the omission of a large part of the play allowed for a quick succession of the scenes left, whereas the kinesiology, designed by Frosso Korrou, reflected the characters' personality and mood as well as the relations between them.

The set and costumes, designed by Christina Kosteá, reproduced successfully the atmosphere of the sixties. Kosteá used swinging panels that enabled quick changes between interior and exterior spaces, depending on the side of the panels that was visible by the audience. On one side the panels were green, and represented the walls of Cymbeline's living-room or Innogen's bedroom, whereas on the other side they looked like old mirrors, which mostly suggested an exterior space. The panels were also used sideways, to denote a space between interior and exterior, as in the last scene, located in a liminal place that is not Cymbeline's living-room but is not outside either.

The light design by Katerina Maragoudaki played an important part in the illustration of both the particular places and the atmosphere of the play. For the outdoor scenes Maragoudaki opted for leaf shadows on the side walls of the stage, whereas in Cymbeline's living-room there was a shadow that reminded the audience of a barred skylight, creating the impression of a prison.

Apart from illustrating the era chosen by the director, Kosteá's costumes also denoted the characters' mood. The Queen, who starts losing her mind when she loses her son, is a good example: In the beginning of the production her clothes fitted her tightly, whereas after Cloten's disappearance her garments were rather airy. The same happened to her hair, which was tightly bound in the beginning, becoming loose later on.

Cohen's choices regarding music also played an important role in his production, underlining the characters' changes of mood (through pieces of music from the sixties which followed the lovers' excitement, the Queen's melancholy etc.) as well as the heavy atmosphere (through an electronic composition that alluded to the harsh repetitive sounds of a machine).

Despite the fact that Cohen had to work with a heterogeneous group of actors, he managed to produce a tight show. Takis Vouteris as Cymbeline combined the King's weariness with the firmness he manages to retain. Eleni Krita in the role of the Queen portrayed as successfully both the strength of her character in the beginning of the play and her gradual psychological decline after the loss of her son. Antigone Drakoulaki as Innogen gave in detail all the mood shifts of the heroine, jumping easily from her cheerfulness in the beginning of the play to her despair (deliberately verging on the comical) when she thinks that

⁶ On this choice see the director's note in the programme (p. 7).

she has just discovered the headless body of her lover. Sarantos Geogleris was very convincing as Cloten, underlining, clearly but without exaggeration, the comical aspect of the role, through his desperate attempts to approach Innogen, antagonize Posthumus, or show that he plays a part in the government of the kingdom. Nektaria Giannoudaki as Cornelia was a firm presence from the beginning to the end of the play, underscoring the manipulating aspect of the character but also underlining the humour of the adapted text. Antonis Fragakis, probably a little milder than what we would have thought of Iachimo, managed nevertheless to illustrate the reversals of his behaviour. Panagiotis Exarcheas enacted with ease Posthumus's psychological shifts, and Romanos Maroudis kept successfully the functional parts of the Roman general and the Doctor.

Alexandros Cohen, who has already staged three Shakespearean plays (the first one being *Much Ado about Nothing* in 2011), revealed in a recent interview that the more familiar he becomes with Shakespeare's texts the more charmed he is by them.⁷ Considering his recent work, mostly with Shakespearean plays that are rarely staged, one wonders which one will be next.



Cymbeline. Dir. Alexandros Cohen. The cast.
Photograph by Patroklos Skafidas.

⁷ See Cohen's interview mentioned in note 4.